

Kaflop und Kaput: 2000 Soaring Adventures
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1/20/2002

The experienced soaring pilots say one doesn't remember the successful XC soaring flights one completes as much as the adventures that begin when you unsuccessfully land-out. As my experience accumulates I'm just now beginning to understand this bit of sage. Exuberance can lead to "learning experiences" which can be regretted and/or enjoyed. I've hesitated to write these stories, but time and seeing others make even more serious mistakes have healed all ego. I would go for it all again, just a little slower. This is a hobby; consider, evaluate, and enjoy each step up the ladder!

I completed my Silver badge in 1998 in OCSA's work horse SGS 1-36 but in 1999 I was having prangs of Gold badge fever. Due to the logistics involved with scheduling a club ship during superior weather to go XC I felt it would be difficult to earn the Gold badge. And spare the ill light shown on the poor OCSA member who pranged a club ship, so I first considered the "need" for owning my own glider. I had been waiting for OCSA to buy a XC glass ship for a few months...but nothing seemed to come on the market that tickled our Board's fancy, so why wait, forward and upward I said! So in late 1998 Team Houdini endeavored to find its own soaring mount for the next year's races.

Keeping with my inchoate teenage soaring lust, I remembered in my teens I had built an R/C model of SH-1 Austria. Later I read in SOARING magazine classifieds that these ships could be purchased for a very reasonable price ("best L/D for the buck" the ads oft said), so my eye was focused on a acquisition target. I looked at two ships before I saw one mentioned for sale on rec.soaring.com. The ship's prior owner posted a note moaning he knew his old SHK had been sitting uncared for in its leaky box for several years. The current owner, who had lost interest in soaring, might be interested in selling. And it was local at Warner Springs. A few weeks later when we pulled the ship out, I quickly disregarded the mouse stench, peeled paint, cracked canopy, shoddy trailer, intermittent instruments, and *knew* the diamond in the rough had to be mine. Ahh...young love is blind!

And so 1999 began with purchasing of an SHK which "desperately needed saving". Several generations of mice had made their home under the seat pan and the trailer had leaked water into several areas obviously swelling the wood and paint. Nothing a little money and elbow grease couldn't fix...(Editors note: Due to OCSA's policy of maintaining a family atmosphere certain harsh language has been excised). To cut things short, most A&Ps told me they only would work on "glass" and most of those who had worked on wooden ships were "retired". It took a lot of push, finagling, more time than expected, and of course considerable dinero. But it was all was felt well valued on that first flight...the SHK could definitely soar.

The SHK was the last wooden ship Schempp-Hirth built just before the all glass Cirrus. Notably it was Klaus Holighaus's first commercial commission to create the open class 17 meter SHK out of the 15 meter Standard Austria. For me the ship was a nice step up

in performance from the 1-36 and in the air it flew outstandingly. 38 to 1 and with a unique ability to hold a high bank angle and a drag chute to boot. After my Schweitzer days I certainly didn't think such effortless stability was possible. Floats like a butterfly and ... well it could hang with most glass ships up to about 70 knots. A "fine racehorse to ride" I noted in my logbook after that first flight day in April 1999. The downside was the ship was heavy to assemble, requiring three persons. True friends I soon discovered I had none.

In 1999 the SHK and I flew at Hemet, 29 Palms, and spent a few months in Tehachapi. My flight time rapidly accumulated and my first XC baby steps progressed towards the great time had at the 1999 Dust Devil Dash (which I have written up elsewhere). The season ended with multiple climbs up the sides of San Jacinto. Friends, I was on top of the world! "The Force" was with me. Other co-students at OCSA started to give me some respect. I felt I had the ship in control and thus proceeded to make plans for the following year to get my Gold/Diamond XC flights completed. They say pride always comes before a fall.

Over the winter I joined up with an informal XC soaring group run by group of pilots but which included many others I had casually met around Hemet, The Soarfari Group. Very informal, minimal structure, newbies could just show up and fly. I liked that! The group was friendly and, because it included a few German pilots, also gave my wife a chance to speak her native German tongue. They scheduled approximately 6 gatherings at various airports, which I plugged into calendar holes in the OCSA schedule. Dance card was now filled.

In April of 2000 the Soarfari group went to Borrego Springs. While only a short distance as the crow flies from Hemet, Borrego is a long circle drive around San Jacinto and Toro mountains. The northeast route through Banning and Palm Springs is straight and long, while the southwest route through Temecula and Warner Springs is slightly shorter but windy, especially with a 30 ft trailer behind a twenty foot truck camper. Swantje crewed with three relatives from Germany, including her 76-year-old father. I had never flown or been there before.

Swantje wrote later in her journal, "Friday morning off to Anza Borrego with Wilhem and Emmi. Beautiful drive! A warm and balmy night with a BBQ at the camp in Tamarisk Grove. Wilhelm and I break camp and hike some and then meet Larry at the airfield. He is ready to take off and I help. Wilhelm and I hang out in the shade, it's hot and windy with lot's of dust devils to watch. Then Larry radios that he will try to make Hemet. The trailer appears to be hooked up, but falls off as we head out of the parking lot smashing the doors. We put it back on and were heading slowly for Hemet thru the windy Morongo Pass. The cell phone rings and its Stan the Van-man saying that Larry didn't make it and has landed out in Anza in a potato field..."

So much for total preparation....

I had gotten on top of Toro Peak and everyone had already left for Hemet. Well if they can make it so could I was my entire preparation. I maxed out fat and happy, and headed directly towards Lake Hemet confusing it (?) with the Thomas Mtn that the others had recommended over the radio from the air. I lost altitude as I slowly crossed the valley against an 18 knot head wind (for which I did not to adjust airspeed). As I approached the *lee* side of the Lake Hemet plateau I hit heavy sink (that most soaring pilots would expect to find)...and, oops, I was now very low. A pilot radioed and suggested I head west towards the Anza Valley (unscouted by me) where thankfully I found a large open field, level and into the wind. At least I got that part right! Get set up, pop the spoilers and pull gently back on the stick. As I float inches above the ground looked soft....KAFLOP. The ship hit the dust like a waterskier into 9 inches of fine powder which cavatated over the canopy with a run out and stop in about 15 feet. I'm brought to a dead stop in a mushroom cloud of dust. Whoa Silver! No damage except to my pride but the *dirt is everywhere*.

Soon an amphetamine hillbilly from the 60s shows up with a 4-wheel drive and tows me to the hard ground. I thank him profusely and he promises to return in a couple of hours when the trailer arrives with my wife. I walk to a Real Estate office and call Hemet and then my wife's cell phone. She has taken the longer opposite eastern Palm Springs route but is almost to Hemet and will eventually $\frac{3}{4}$ circle San Jacinto to get to Anza. Ugh! I head to a restaurant to chill out for calculated three-hour wait. After a while I read every freebee Anza real estate ad magazine and memorized the restaurant menu backwards. I marked time by how often I have to get up and recycle the Cokes the waitress keeps refilling.

At 8:30 pm Swantje and her father arrive hungry. They stay for dinner while I move the trailer to the plane and begin disassembly. No one stops by to help me. With the weight of the 220 lb wings, I can't disassemble without at least two good strong backs. Well maybe later...I head back to pick up Swantje and her father at the restaurant. We return...now it's very dark and quiet. Few cars pass, we casually wave....then at 11pm the first car in an hour we nearly forcibly flag down. Inside is an older couple both in their late 70's, Margaret and PJ. Surprised at their age, I ask, "Do you possibly have a young son or friend who could help?" No they say but they are "willin' to help as we've see you land this afternoon". Their old bones nearly creak out loud as my wife and PJ on the wingtip, me on the root and Margaret on the trailing edge lift the first wing. Swantje's father holds the fuselage. Actually we all get some late night fun out of it and I thank them profusely. Sometime near midnight we head back to Hemet, drop off the trailer and finally get home to Costa Mesa at 3am in the morning.

I spend the next three weekends vacuuming the dust out of the SHK.

End of May, destination Lone Pine, and hell bent for leather. Rollin', rollin', rollin', up the Owen's, raw-hiiiiide! The first day of flying was a good with me unconsciously showing off to all how the conditions were going to be for the rest of the weekend: Start late and fly the wave. The thermal conditions were not as good as it looked which confused many early starters. Many pilots had angled to launch early, headed towards the

haystack, and nearly all fell out of the sky. This generated much frustration as everyone now fought for relights with marginal towplane capacity.

Most were grumbling on the ground, indeed putting their ships away, when I hit 15,000ft directly overhead after my first launch at 3 pm. This flight was the highest I'd ever been and the first time I used the SHK's oxygen system. From Lone Pine, I could see up and down the great majestic Owens Valley. For my experience level it was quite a flight and I landed late, nearly alone, and with big smiles. ☺

With all the promise shown from the previous day, I looked forward to sunup and the next flight. After launch, now like others the day before, I struggled at the haystack and then turned back towards the airport. Another glider was in front of me at the same altitude as we crossed over (and didn't think to land at) the main runway. We radioed each other and agreed he would land on the glider runway first and long. I attempted to land short by marginally clearing a set of trees at the beginning of the runway. Passing the trees I opened the spoilers completely, and pushed the nose forward to maintain speed in rapid descent. I pulled back to flare and experienced an existential moment of dread as my descent was not arrested as expected but rather I mushed directly into the runway and a hard landing.

The combination of full spoilers combined with probably a lessening wind gradient resulted in my second "kaflop" but now the SHK was also "kaput". The ship skidded down the runway looking normal to all observers though I was rider without reins. When the gear collapsed it pinched the control rods and the stick froze. I had to radio for help to come and drag the ship off the runway as the landing wheel was pinched. Thankfully, the SHK's gear took the energy completely and I felt no pain afterwards.

I spent the rest of the year trying to find an A&P interested in quickly repairing the ship. As the time wore on it became clear that the ship would not fly again that year. So a little over one year and 30 SHK flights later, my first racehorse was put to pasture. In 1999 I felt I could do no wrong, in 2000 I couldn't stay in the saddle. I spent the rest of the year licking my wounds flying club ships within glide slope of the field. I needed to think and rebuild confidence. With great reluctance I sold the SHK to an A&P friend who promised to bring her back to life once more, which he enjoyably has. He got a good project (and tells me he's still finding potato field dust) and a good ship.

"Kaflop und kaput", my soaring low points of 2000. Never fly into an area you haven't checked out first from the ground, review your task on a map prior to flight with the experts *on the ground*, always carry a paperback book to read, and consider your options thoroughly as you have more than you think.

Too giant of a leap "beyond" without doing the proper preparation can be stressful, costly and dangerous. You are PIC, trust your gut and focus on creative practice to lower the stress. Over time you will progress. Break down your goals into as many small skill steps as possible before you assemble the whole enchilada. The success in 2001 was a direct result of a commitment to "never again" be unprepared. Just because you own your

own ship doesn't mean you know how to fly it safely. Don't let others seemingly easy exploits over inspire your confidence. Make a list of baby steps and enjoy each one fully...it's *your* hobby!

Believe and soar,
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