

Memorial Day Campout 2002 – Al Cangahuala

Last weekend was the first time in three years that OCSA has been back at Twentynine Palms airport. Many of you recall that several club members have used this opportunity to ‘leave the nest’ for the first time, or to attempt cross-country flights, picking up badge legs along the way. This year’s campout kept up the tradition, with almost everyone achieving some sort of first in duration, altitude, distance (and new ship)!

We started our weekend with Galen Fisher aerotowing Keith Schrader and Richard Harwick in the Grob 103 over from Hemet. Upon arriving, John Downing and myself took tows in the PW5 and LS3, respectively. We both launched after 5pm, yet were both able to find lots of lift in the hills to the south. John got to 10.5K and I went to Hi Desert and the TNP VOR, then we all hit Rocky’s Pizza for pre-campout hangar flying.

On Saturday, the conditions seemed a little warmer than the previous day, and cu’s were forming out over San Gorgonio/Big Bear. Winds were light, mostly from the South.

Three years earlier, I had made my Silver distance flight from the TNP VOR to Yucca Valley. I thought it would be appropriate to make a Diamond Goal attempt during this campout. This time, it would be a 191-mile flight from TNP to Hi Desert (which would be the first turnpoint), then to Vidal Junction (the second turnpoint), and return to TNP. Over the previous weeks I had worked out all of the kinks in the ship’s radio (with help from Keith), had visited the possible landing sites, and had made the necessary preparations for the flight. Richard Harwick graciously agreed to crew for me that day.

I launched at around 12:30 PM, and Galen took me to the south end of the airport where I released. Unlike the previous evening, I struggled for a while (in the meantime John Downing launched and quickly climbed through 5.5K). I finally got to 7K and headed to Hi Desert using the hills to the south. The lift there was weak, but I managed to reach Hi Desert at 6K. I took my turn pictures and went back into the hills to start towards TNP – nothing. I called Richard to head towards Hi Desert when I got to 4.5K; at 4.3K I finally got some 6 kt. lift just west of Copper Mountain, north of the highway and climbed to 8.6K. I called off Richard and headed back to TNP just going down along the highway.

At this point, over 2 hours into the flight, I thought it would not be possible to complete the task, but it would be a good experience to learn about ‘life and lift’ east of the TNP VOR. So I asked Richard to continue on to Dale Dry Lake. I found lift (again in the flats) to the NW and on top of Dale, got back up to 7K, and decided to shoot for Cadiz Dry Lake (while Pot Dry Lake looked good, it’s in a Wilderness area (no motorized vehicles allowed)). That was probably the fastest ‘leg’ of the day (about 80 kts). I sniffed for thermals in the foothills southeast of Cadiz, trying to get high enough to clear the ridge and see the Iron Mountain strip, which is nestled against the east side of the ridge. I got to 5K, cleared the ridge (by about 200 ft!) and presto – there it was! I went around the strip to check it out, and as I passed over some nearby buildings I found some stronger lift, and climbed back up to 7.5K. With that I decided to press on to Rice. Most of the lift I had run into was 2-3 kts., so I was cruising at a shade over best L/D most of the way. I stayed to the hills north of Hwy. 62, and was abeam of Rice with enough altitude to reach Vidal Junction. Northwest of town, I found enough lift to reach 9.6K (my high for the day); enough to make turn pics. I thought that the close proximity to the Colorado would kill the lift, but it didn’t. It was the first time that I saw the Colorado

River and Lake Havasu. From TNP, 80 miles away, Jim Hykes briefly remarked 'sounds like you're having a fun flight' – he summed up my feelings at the moment nicely.

I had enough altitude to go back to Rice. Now I tried to use every good spot that I had found on the way out. That strategy wasn't too bad, except that the sky was getting overcast, and the air was getting smoother. By the time I returned to Iron Mountain, I was back down to 4.5K, and I thought that the flight would end there. I tried the buildings again, crawled back up to 6.5K, cleared the ridge again, and proceeded to Cadiz.

At this point it's about 5 hours (into the flight, that is, not this article ☺) and I'm starting to think that I just might get back, but I better pick up the pace. Richard is feeding me wind reports, and he notes that the winds have shifted to the west. I decide not to veer back North to Cadiz, but head for the hills East of Pot – if I find something there, I'm at least back to Dale. I check the GPS, and on the 'nearest waypoints' setting TNP is inching up the list; I only have 35 miles to go (I'm also checking for traffic; although it's a holiday weekend, I have seen military jets smoke through this valley before).

In the hills I get to 7.5K; enough for Dale. I tell Richard to head on. By the time I reach Dale I know I have TNP made, so I send him home. I see him on the 62 as I pass him – a most satisfying sight to see the team coming home safely. There's an extra 1K at TNP, I check with Keith about winds, and had a smooth landing. It's great to see everyone; we took a few pictures, and a cold barley refreshment was put in my (sore!) hand (need to fix the trim next). We then proceeded to Brigitte's in Yucca Valley (good German food!) to swap stories about the day.

On Sunday morning the skies were more overcast; it appeared that a low trough had moved in, bringing in moisture. We thought that the lift wouldn't be as good, but by noon cu's were developing all along the valley (where were they on Saturday? ☺) People zipped up and down the valley; Jim Hykes got to 11.4K in the Blanik and made his furthest excursion yet, visiting the TNP VOR. Later that afternoon, we got to see Cristina and Galen both thermaling, in the Blanik and Pawnee, respectively. The 29 Palms club had been performing winch launches throughout the weekend, but did take advantage of the tow plane and aero-towed their 2-33 a few times.

Sunday evening we had our cookout on the grounds where the trees used to be. Although we all lamented the 'deforestation' at TNP, we had enough awning real estate to guarantee shade for anyone who wanted it. Jason brought out the 'fire ring thing' every evening, and the winds behaved, so we could hang out quite comfortably.

On Monday, we packed up the Grob 103 early (where were you all to fly it?), but the other ships were launched well into the day. Keith, who had been racking up frequent flyer miles in the valley all weekend, decided to make an official Silver distance run from the VOR to Yucca Valley. Not only did he make it, he also returned to TNP (stay tuned for more details on that flight from Merlin himself).

Not to count chickens, but if we did our data logging and documentation correctly, we will have gotten a Gold and Silver badge and a Diamond out of this campout, as well as lots of fun hours in the new ship, and personal goals of all sorts. The operations were safe and well run. Thanks to everyone that worked hard to make the campout a success!