

The Continuing Story of “Dog-Gone Bill”

by John Heiney

2008 Interview of Bill Soderquist



Dog-Gone Bill among just a few of his many hang gliding trophies. Note Bill's First Place in the Open Class at the 2008 King Mountain Hang Gliding Championships (in the foreground).

Over the past several years Bill Soderquist (pronounced with a long “o”) AKA “Dog-Gone Bill” has earned a reputation as the undisputed XC champion of Lake Elsinore. With all due respect to Randy Haney who popped off a (to-this-day unmatched) 161 miler from the “E” in a contest in the eighties; Bill, by sheer numbers of long open-distance, out-and-return, and triangle flights has established himself as the one with the most talent, dedication, and joy-of-flight attitude in the area. As he and his wife and dedicated super-driver, Marilyn prepared to leave for the 2008 Lakeview Nats, I asked Bill these questions:

JH: When did you start flying hang gliders?

DGB: I started in 1989. I offered my Dad a sail boat ride or a tandem hang gliding ride for Christmas when he was sixty-five, and he decided he wanted to go hang gliding. I got him a flight with Rob McKenzie and he landed with a big grin on his face. I decided I better try this too.

JH: What did you know about hang gliding at that time?

DGB: I had seen the articles in Popular Science and Popular Mechanics around 1974. Dad and I were always planning to put together an auto-gyro or a hang glider. We were in the flat lands of North Dakota. In about '75 I was in Minnesota, and they were flying off the bluffs. They were offering lessons for forty bucks that would get you off the dog-gone bluffs. They had guys who had soared for 30 or 40 minutes which was probably close to a World record in those days. Luckily I didn't learn to fly then, or I probably would have killed myself. [laughing]

JH: Do you fly any other aircraft?

DGB: Paragliders and the Mosquito harness. When I was in college a friend was teaching me to fly an airplane, but he died on me and I never completed the course.

JH: How old are you?

DGB: 54

JH: Where were you born?

DGB: Columbus, North Dakota, far northwest corner of the state, but I was actually born in the hospital that happened to be across the border in Canada.

JH: Where did you first fly hang gliders?

DGB: Pepper, near Crestline.

JH: Who was your instructor?

DGB: Rob McKenzie

JH: What is your personal best flight?

DGB: 178 miles. I have several around 170 to 175.

JH: Do you know how many hours you have?

DGB: Around 4700. I got a pile of dog-gone paper log books, but now I just download my flight computer.

JH: What is your philosophy of Life?

DGB: I figure if you don't dog-gone live a little bit and push it a little bit once in a while, it really isn't worth it. I don't want to go overboard and get too risky on it, but the adrenaline comes from living close to the edge.

JH: Do you have a most memorable flight?

DGB: There is one that I wish I had taken, but common sense kicked in and I turned around when it looked like I had Catalina made. After landing on the beach in Newport, I realized I would have made it or at least I think I would have. The island was twenty miles away from me with a 25 mph tailwind at 8000 feet when I turned around out at sea and flew in. People on the beach had radioed me that the wind was on-shore at the surface. I thought I would hit that headwind at 4000 feet. When I got back I went into aerobatic mode. I didn't go through the dog-gone onshore until about 800 feet.

If you're trying to fly to an island, a quarter-mile is as good as a dog-gone thousand miles if you're short. [laughing]

JH: How far have you flown from Elsinore?

DGB: The farthest was 106 miles where I landed at Barstow, but I had flown quite a bit further and turned back. I've got a couple hundred milers and a couple in the 90's. I've been out to Desert Center and Amboy.

JH: How about out-and-returns?

DGB: I have managed to make it out over San Gorgonio and back to the LZ. I've been over San Jacinto and out over Palm Springs. I once made it out over Palm Springs and came back and landed on top of the mountain next to my car. It only took about 4 ½ hours. [smiles]

JH: Do you have a favorite flying site?

DGB: I'd say Elsinore.

JH: If you could change anything in your life, what would you change?

DGB: I'd probably start flying sooner, and compete more.

JH: Do you have children?

DGB: No kids. No pets. We spend our time flying. Marilyn flew for a while. She has 75 high altitude flights. She's an important part of my support and a big reason why I am as good as I am. She enjoys chasing me which is a rarity, and being a pilot, she can find me even when I'm lost. I have landed and told her "I don't know where I am", and she pulls up thirty seconds later, because she knows where I was going to look for lift.

I have even had her pull into a field and turn a donut or two to break a dog-gone thermal off for me. [laughs]

JH: When did you first come to Elsinore?

DGB: 1990. Crestline was close to home, so I flew there regularly. When I got on my own I started my penance at Elsinore.

JH: Tell me about that day. What glider were you flying? Who else was flying here then?

DGB: Mitch McAleer, Ron Young, Jerry Smith, Doug Domokos, Raleigh Collins. Raleigh was flying naked. It blew down and they said "We'll fly the Valley." I was flying a 185 Dream with big orange wheels. Someone said "Do you need those wheels? It's all lava rock and cactus out there." I said "Not always." So we went to Hidden Valley. Raleigh got naked again and it was all lava rock and cactus. [laughing]

Those pilots were the ones I looked up to, and they were some of the World's best. That gave me something to shoot for. [laughs]

JH: What does hang gliding mean to you?

DGB: It is when I relax. The phone is not there. The beeper is not there. When I first flew, Rob didn't think I was interested. After some sky diving and building power lines for a living, it wasn't that much of a thrill sport, but it was a challenge. It is like the kids' video games. You are looking for stuff that's not really there, trying to find thermals and stuff.

I can go up there and I get focused and I enjoy the beauty and the peace. It's me and Mother Nature, just floating around. You chase the birds. The birds chase you. You chase the clouds. I can play with the convergence. I just relax when I hit the air.

JH: What do you do for a living?

DGB: I build power lines. When I started hang gliding I did the work, but now I just supervise which makes it tougher to stay in shape.

When I first started flying, people thought I was crazy because I would get low behind the ridge or land out. On my sixth solo flight I did not make it back to the LZ. What's going to happen to me? I'll bend some aluminum. If I make a mistake at work, I'll be dead. I told people "It is just a matter of risk management, and this isn't near the risk I take at work every day". [laughs]

JH: I heard that you launched at the “E” one day last year after it had blown down and others were folding down; and flew to Crestline. Tell me that story.

DGB: The “E” is a kind of a special place. Sometimes you gotta kinda believe in it. It will turn around, but people will give up on it. In my younger days we used to walk down the hill a little and dog-gone run off, just to get the glider off the hill. I have been 300 feet off the deck at Grand Avenue and hooked one and climbed out to the convergence.

I have also run off the back of dog-gone Rad Dan’s and run out to catch up with it. Just because its blowing down, it doesn’t mean its over. You can’t launch if you don’t set it up.

I had a flight at the “E” not a month ago where the soaring forecast was for 1200 over launch. I launched in a pair of speed sleeves, and went out and fooled around. I headed for Hemet anyway figuring I would just have to work a few more on the way. When I got to Hemet things got better. I thought what the heck, I’ll try to “ring the bell” as I call it. Get on top of “San Jack” and turn around and go home rather than make the big glide out to the desert.

As I climbed through 13,500 looking at a cloud street going to the desert, I was shaking so bad I could hardly talk on the radio because I didn’t have enough clothes on. It was only supposed to be a 4500 foot day.

I have made the run to Crestline 30 or 40 times now. I’ve got the route pretty fairly down. [smiles]

JH: What contests have you won, or finished second or third?

DGB: The latest one is King Mountain. I managed to win the open class this year. I finished second last year. I won first twice and second twice, and I’ve only been there four times. [smiles]

I won Chelan one year when there were 89 pilots there. I have also placed third at Chelan. I have won Lakeview and local contests at Crestline, Elsinore, Mingus, Sylmar.

JH: Do you have another interesting flight story to tell me?

DGB: I launched at Walt’s Point once when it was blowing down. You could hear the wind in the trees, and then the rotor would come up in your face. That happened over and over. 30 or 40 pilots were breaking down. I go “Well, I come to fly”.

Every once in a while a thermal would come up the launch, and I knew it was a dog-gone thermal because you wouldn’t hear the rush in the trees behind launch before it hit. And you could see it coming up the launch. I’m thinking if I launch into the thermal instead of the rotor, I can climb out. There was a cloud up in the back and you could see it rotating in the rotor.

Other pilots were saying it blows 130 and blows airplanes to the bottom of the valley. I was going, “I can do this”. They were all loaded on the trucks and thinking I’m nuts. I finally told them “No more negative thoughts”.

I stood at launch and waited for a thermal to come up. When the wind stopped from behind and I felt the wind in my face, I launched and turned immediately because there’s where the thermal is. I climbed out to the peak and went inverted a few times going through the rotor at the top of the peak. I popped out into a wave. I had never been in a dog-gone wave before and I didn’t recognize it. Pretty soon I’m facing west and I’m climbing fast in smooth lift. As I climbed through 14,000 I pulled in to 50. I’m thinking I’m gonna get killed when I land.

I’m thinking “if I hide behind the Alabamas maybe it won’t be blowing so hard”. I headed straight out to the Alabamas and stuck it in behind the hills, and it wasn’t blowing hardly at all on the ground. Here, all the way to the ground, I thought I was gonna get killed. [laughing]

Sometimes you know, you think you’re good, but you gotta realize that you got away with it. You are not really that good, you just got away with it. If you do that too many times, you are not going to get away with it every time.

~ END ~