

Chris Bolfing, A Career Pilot

2009 Interview

by John Heiney

In 1978 a 12 year-old boy in Half Moon Bay, California pleaded with his mother to drive him up the coast to Fort Funston. There was something new going on that he had seen from the window of his parent's car. People were flying without an engine, or even an airplane.

Soon, Pat Bolfing would be driving her young son to his hang gliding lessons. Chris was the youngest person I know of to start hang gliding in those early days, and continue flying to this day. And he turned out to be a natural. At his tender age, Chris ingested instruction voraciously.

In no-time this fledgling teenager was soaring the cliffs at "The Fort". At that time they were still in denial about the dangers of coastal flying. Fortunately, Chris was a good student and made it through the heydays of his hang gliding career without injury.

I met Chris when we both worked at Torrey Pines doing tandems for Bill Bennett in the mid eighties. Later, we toured as members of Scott Gressitt's UP Sky Sports team, a group of aerobats promoting hang gliders and paragliders for UP International.



Chris Bolfing



Chris at 12-years of age with his Seagull Seahawk
Photo by Pat Bolfing

Chris Won the 1996 Masters of Freestyle Hang Gliding Tournament and set a World Spin record during the 1999 Masters of Freestyle contest at Lake Elsinore by doing 20 revolutions off a 3000 feet tow.

After an exceptionally fun and successful career in hang gliding, Chris felt the desire to progress into a real flying career. As with many other ambitious and studious hang glider pilots before him, Chris re-directed his flying education towards airplanes. Recently, I asked him these questions:

JH: How long have you been flying hang gliders?

CB: Thirty years.

JH: Why have you continued to fly so long?

CB: It is still the best kind of flying. I still dream about flying. There is no glider, just me with my arms outstretched. I thermal, I launch at Funston. I don't know why. Once I dreamed I was swimming with a school of fish at La Jolla Shores. I came out of the water and climbed the cliff at Torrey Pines and flew (without a glider of course). That dream inspired me to build a glider with a fish scale design.

JH: Who was your instructor?

CB: A man named Lowell "Banana" Levinger.



Chris flying Bill Bennett's Pepsi 220 Dream at Torrey Pines in 1988 - Photo by John Heiney

JH: Did you have role-models or mentors?

CB: Lots of them. You were one in aerobatics. Kelly Dearborn was a great mentor to me at Fort Funston when I first started. Most of the guys avoided me because I was so young. They were afraid I would get hurt and they would feel somehow responsible. The guys from Stratus: Wayne Bowen, Dan Racanelli. Hanging with them was when I first saw aerobatics.

JH: Do you know how many hours you have?

CB: No.

JH: Have you had any serious injuries?

CB: No.

JH: Do you have a most memorable flight?

CB: I remember catching thermals off the ocean at midnight.

JH: Do you have a favorite flying site?

CB: Blossom Valley. When I lived in San Diego I used to love going to Blossom, get up, and fly back to El Cap. Funston, Torrey, Telluride. Utah is so scenic.

JH: Where did you first fly hang gliders?

CB: Dillon Beach. I first soared at Funston.

JH: Tell me about the first time you flew Fort Funston. What glider were you flying? Who else was flying there then?

CB: As soon as I turned I was above launch. It was great! I was holding on way too tight because I did not want to go to the beach. I had bought a Seagull Seahawk from Judy Nielson for my first glider. Dave Chavez, Walt Nielson, Mark Lilledahl, lots of the same characters who are still there.

JH: What does hang gliding mean to you?

CB: It is probably the biggest influence of my life. I have met many great people. I have worked in it. It is what I enjoy. It's the best thing in my life.

JH: Where were you born?

CB: Washington DC. We lived in Bowie, Maryland.

JH: Where is your home now?

CB: Orlando, Florida

JH: Tell me about the hang glider manufacturers you have worked for.

CB: I lived in Half Moon Bay as a boy, not far from the Stratus factory in the old school house in Montara. It was owned by Dan Racanelli and Todd Bomont. I used to go there and sweep up and do odd jobs just to be around hang gliders and hang glider people.



Chris on the Super Dream. This was a center spread in Hang Gliding Magazine (June 1988). Photo by John Heiney



Chris flying the experimental Super Dream 185 double surface at Torrey (1988)
Photo by John Heiney

CB: I did test flying and tandems for Delta wing owned by Bill Bennett. I worked for UP Elsinore, run by Mitch McAleer. I did certification work and test flying.

I worked for Jean-Michel Bernasconi at Pacific Airwave. I did demo tours around the western states, plus certification flying: steep dives, spins, 45 to 45 roll reversals. I had some input on the original Double Vision. I worked with Kamron Blevins on figuring out the Double Vision landing issues.

JH: You earned an ATP and fly for a major airline. What additional ratings have you achieved and what planes have you flown?

CB: I have 4 type ratings and a check-airman's certificate. When I do that, it makes me the last guy to sign off a new pilot before he carries passengers. I was a captain for 7 years. Right now I work as first officer on the 737-300, 500, 700, 800, and 900.

JH: Did other hang glider pilots turned airplane pilots help you get started?

CB: Yes. Joe Bostik, Steve Lance, Steve Brockman who worked for Pacific Airwave got me right-seat time in the Citation. It's a great community of talented people who like to help out fellow hang pilots.

JH: Do you ever carry a hang glider with you when you travel by airline?

CB: On vacation I have, but not working. Mostly I will just catch a ride out to the Fort when I have a lay-over in San Francisco and bum a glider.



Chris Bolfig showing off his Torrey Hawks T-Shirt at “work”.

JH: The guy who landed the A-320 in the Hudson River recently flies sailplanes. Do you feel your experience in hang gliding makes you a safer airline pilot?

CB: Absolutely. I was descending into Washington-Dulles one time and noticed lenticulars. I saw a rotor cloud in my path and warned flight attendants to be seated. I was able to avoid the turbulence.

On landing approaches, I look at flags, smoke, clothes lines for a clue at what’s really happening on the ground.

JH: You have been into competition swimming for some time. What are your accomplishments in the water?

CB: I do mostly open-water swims, 1 or 2 miles. I do triathlons and usually win my age group. I have done the Alcatraz swim twice. My group set a world record for the fastest 100 K relay in a lake. I got inducted into the Marathon Swimmer’s Hall of Fame.

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

CB: I wish I could be young again and not have to have a real job. (laughs) I feel like I should have spent more time with the great people I have met, and been a better promoter and mentor.

JH: What is your philosophy of Life?

CB: You once told me that all I ever want to do is have fun. Maybe that’s it. (laughs)

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