

KSA Kowbell Adventure - 1986

For over 30 years, the Kansas Soaring Association has held an annual free distance contest which takes place on the first Saturday after the first full moon on or after the summer solstice. The contest begins at Sunflower Aerodrome near Hutchinson, Kansas and ends as far away as each pilot can fly. My crew consisted of Bernie Mohr, a seasoned glider pilot and long-time friend of my Dad's and Sandi Lancaster, then my 18 year-old girlfriend. This was to be Sandi's first experience as a cross country crew. At stake in this prestigious event is possession of a magnificent trophy for one year. The trophy is an outline of the state of Kansas with a cowbell suspended inside, the tone of which is music only to the ears of the victor.



Ron: Sandi and I arrived at Sunflower at about 9:00 am to allow ample time to assemble the HP-16 and to be sure I got my choice of grid position. The winds were loight, so I told Sandi that I would probably head west along Highway 54. Eager to get going, I took the first launch at 12:30 into a blue sky. I found moderate lift about two miles west of the field. The thermals were not too strong and quit below 3,000 agl, so I proceeded due west very carefully. When I got to Arlington, Kansas, about 10 miles west of the field, I told my crew to set out.



Sandi: Bernie and I started out just fine. We were going to head for Pratt, but my inexperience at navigation kept us missing turns west until Pretty Prairie. From there we went south to Kingman to pick up highway 54 west to Pratt. However, we kept hearing all the more experienced pilots on the radio saying they were heading south. Bernie and I thought Ron would eventually do the same, so at Cunningham we turned south.

Ron: There were cumulus forming to the south but they didn't look great and were a long way off, so I worked west in the blue from Arlington towards Pratt. Several times I considered going south, but I knew there had been an inordinately large amount of rain about 100 miles in that direction, and I intended to go farther than that. Also, going west along highway 54 makes for easy navigation, a lot of good landing areas, and an airport about every 15 miles. I reached Pratt at about 1600 agl and caught a weak thermal that got me to 2500 agl. Just west of town I caught a nice thermal which took me to 4200 agl, the high point of the day, so far. I radioed my position to my crew, but didn't say where I was heading next. (An important omission?)

Sandi: A few miles after we turned, Ron told us he was at Pratt. Too bad we didn't ask him where he was going next. That was the last time we had radio contact.

Ron: As I left Pratt, the soaring got slowly better. Between there and Greensburg Kansas, I consistently topped out over 3000 agl and once or twice over 4000 agl. I was elated to have come this far in the blue so low. I wondered if everyone else

had reached the cu by now and left be behind. As I traveled along highway 54 the cu followed behind, to the south and even to the north. They were inviting but I didn't want to make a 90 degree course change and lose precious miles to get to them.

Sandi: We got to Medicine Lodge and decided we might head west awhile, in case Ron had done the same. I had mentioned to Bernie that Ron had said he would follow highway 54, but Mr. Mohr was an experienced pilot and said things looked better south. I had to agree with him, and we figured Ron would think likewise. Just after passing Coldwater and heading for Protection, Kansas, Bernie said the trailer was bucking rather badly. I looked in the rear view mirror and saw one of the trailer tires was so shredded I was amazed it was still on! We pulled over only to discover there was no spare. Luckily, a very nice local man came by and almost immediately and through a series of minor miracles (a station owner dragged from his home and \$10 plus the old wheel), the tire was fixed in only half an hour.

Ron: From Greensburg the lift had been consistent if not strong or tall. The miles began to pass more quickly and at about 5:00 pm I made it to Liberal! Wit the help of a hawk and a nice hot power plant, I found a strong thermal that took me to 7300 agl.

Sandi: After this mishap, we went south to Buffalo, Oklahoma. We were calling our connection in Wichita every half hour or so, figuring Ron must have landed since we hadn't heard from him for so long. He still wasn't down by 6:40 so we decided that once we arrived at Shattuck, Oklahoma, we would hang out until we learned where he was.

Ron: As I continued to follow 54, the heat and lack of shade began to tell on me. I decided to open my map and find a suitable airport to end my flight. In the several minutes it took me to wrestle with my map the HP-16 wallowed in a most ungraceful manner. However, I saw Dalhart, Texas on the map just a few folds away. Several club members had talked about driving to Dalhart to fly their gliders; well, I'd just fly my glider to Dalhart to drive my car! As I continued to work west, the lift was consistently stong, but not very tall. I got below 2000 agl at least once, and several times considered landing. Finally, a little after 7:00 pm, I spotted Miller Field east of Dalhart. I wasn't sure if the glider operation was there or at the municipal airport several miles ahead. North of Miller Field I found a good thermal, but when I spotted a glider trailer, I immediately cranked down the flaps and headed for the pattern. I could probably have flown another hour, but a landing among glider pilots at an airport would beat a landing in the boonies any day, especially since I had no idea where my crew was. I was amazed I actually made it to Dalhart, 273 miles from Sunflower!

Sandi: We got to Shattuck about 7:30 pm and discovered Ron had landed only minutes before. That was the good news. The bad news was that we had a 3 hour drive west to get there. If we were lucky we would get there by 11:00pm. What was really the clincher was the fact that Dalhart was right on highway 54. Aaaagh! Who ever heard of a pilot going a predetermined direction on Kowbell Day? Ah well, onward and westward!

Ron: When I rolled to a stop, there were several glider types standing around chatting. They hadn't even noticed me landing. The airport owner, Mr. Miller, drove over and introduced himself, then went and honked at the others. They were a bit surprised to see me. Ben Wilson walked over and introduced himself and asked where I was from. "Wichita" I replied. "Wichita! I bet you need one of these!" he said, holding up his beer. "Actually, I need to use your bathroom." Ben told me it was a good thing I landed when I did. Five minutes later and I would have been at a locked and lonely airport several miles from the nearest phone. From the time I landed I got the red carpet treatment. They put the HP in their hangar and took me into town to Steve Terry's house. There I was fed cold drinks, nacho chips and charcoal hamburgers. We sat around swapping flying stories until about 11:00. Then everybody called it a night and I parked on the couch wondering where in the world my crew as. All I had heard was that when Bernie called he was in Oklahoma and his response to being told I was in Dalhart, was, "Oh, my God!"

Sandi: Bernie and I no longer wish to visit the Texas panhandle at night. Just at dusk, a suicidal female mallard threw herself at my side of the car. Wings spread and eyes wide, she bent the radio antenna and a blur whizzed between Bernie and me into the back seat. Among the floating feathers, we could hear bags rustling in the back. Not relishing the possibility of broken duck in our sandwiches, I set about trying to find it. I moved aside the sandwiches, chips, rear-view mirror, and trash bag, but no duck. Thinking she may have gotten hung up on the trailer, I looked in the rear-view mirror, but wait just a dog gone minute. That wasn't in the back seat before the kamikaze duck attack. Not long after this, the alternator light came on. We went nearly a hundred miles with no problems, so we decided it was just a short in the idiot light. Then the lights got a little dimmer. We slowed down to let a van around us and then turned off our lights and used his. No doubt the van driver got a little nervous about this. Unfortunately, this caused us to miss a sign and we made a 10-mile side trip in the wrong direction. We kept limping along with 75% power in the headlights, until we got 7 miles east of Stratford, Texas. Then the beams got really tired and drooped down to the ground. Two miles further, the spark plugs started missing. At this point, Bernie sighted on a star on the horizon and we shut off the lights to save power, turning them on every 5-10 seconds to make sure we were still on the arrow-straight road. Thus hobbling along we managed to get to Stratford but that was it for the night. At wits end, we called Ron, only 30 miles away.

Ron: A little after midnight my crew finally called. I expected them to say they were in the area and ask how to get to me. Boy, was I ever surprised! Bernie began by saying "You wouldn't believe the adventures we've had!" First he told me my car was dead and blocking the entrance to a mortuary in Stratford. I had once seen a car that Bernie pronounced dead and found this statement profoundly disturbing. Then, he told me the whole tale of their adventures; a flat tire, duck damage, a dead alternator and even deader battery. All of this while I was half asleep, not exactly sure where I was, with all of three dollars on my person. Now that I was thoroughly flabbergasted, Sandi suggested I should wake my hosts and ask for help, and Bernie asked me what they should do. With the car's electrical system dead there wasn't much to do except wait until morning.

Sandi: I called my mom to tell her I was in a motel in Texas with a man she'd never met and would be home sometime the next day. This did not thrill her! Bernie and I got a couple of rooms and then spent some time trying to find a battery charger we could use. We saw a man dressed only in running shorts lounging on the hood of his car, surrounded by a bevy of teenage girls. Bernie asked this 30 year-old King of the Teenagers (obviously a man destined for greatness), " Do you suppose there's a battery charger somewhere in this town we could use?" This local kingpin motioned for one of the cars cruising Main Street to come over and the young driver said we could use his if we let him put the battery in his garage overnight. Through Bernie's resourcefulness and the complete tool kit Ron kept in his 75 Celica (I wonder why?) we did so. In the morning, I got up at Bernie's knock and there was the car, right out front. I was amazed to say the least, but we headed south. We had some problems with carburetor ice or vapor lock just south of Stratford but got under way again after a backfire or two.

Ron: The next morning, Ben Wilson got up at about 7:00. After I explained the problem with my car, he took me to the airport, got a battery and an alternator, and we headed toward Stratford. To my surprise, Bernie passed us going the other way, so we turned around and led him to the HP.

Sandi: We never would have found the airport on our own! When we went to put the glider in the trailer we discovered several parts had escaped somewhere near Protection, Kansas (flat tire, leaky trailer). Mr. Wilson graciously supplied us with the bits needed to secure the HP for the trip home.

Ron: Just before we left the airport, my parents called. When I answered the phone my Dad (Kowbell winner from the previous year) rang the Kowbell and offered his congratulations. Saturday had been my lucky day, if not Sandi and Bernie's, my first try had won it!

Sandi: The experience makes for some super stories, but remembering how dark the Texas panhandle was at 11:00 pm with a dying car, I don't want to go through the same thing again. Next time, well ask Ron where he's going first. After a first crewing experience like this one, he was lucky get a next time. Good thing he won!

Ron: Thankful for the light of day, a resourceful crew and the help of my new friends in Dalhart, we headed home. About 9 hours and one quick charge later, we made it. I dropped off Bernie at the airport and Sandi at her house. The Celica made it to the end of my Dad's driveway and died. The PCV valve had failed, the carb was flooded with oil, the alternator was dead, the right side rear view mirror and radio antenna were in the back seat and the battery was utterly dead. It was an incredible weekend, but I am sure glad that Kowbell day is only once a year!