

KSA Kowbell Adventure - July 26 1997

Kowbell!!! Finally got my radio on Thursday and the Microphone on Friday, packed up my stuff and Kit and headed for Wichita on Friday night. Saturday morning forecast was for very hot and muggy, strong south wind and no clouds. AM satellite showed a narrow north south band of clouds from central Oklahoma to Nebraska centered on Sunflower. Great. Weak front curved from southern Colorado to northeaster Nebraska. Mike Eppler agreed to crew for me. We put the glider together early even though the weather didn't look great. When we went to push the dolly out from under the glider it seemed harder than usual. I guess the strut is completely flat. Thump. Nope, the gear is up not down!@#\$\$@#% \$ Mike and I pick up the glider and Dave Colling slides the dolly back under the fuselage. I laugh sheepishly and Mike remarks, "I don't know Ron, this seems like a bad omen."

The weather outlook seems bleak. No Cu's visible and heating starting out late. I wonder if anyone will even make 50 miles. Harry Clayton and I talk about the weather and neither of us is very excited about flying. About noon we all pull onto the launch line. John Wells in KJ (ASW-20), Dennis Brown in LY (Mosquito), Steve Leonard in ZS (604), Neil Pfiefer in 14 (Ka-16), Harry Clayton in 8A (Cirrus), Mark Webie in the Lark, Dave Woody in the 1-26, Ray Sharp in the HP 14 and Dave Colling in F1 (HP-18). Quite a good crowd. Cirrus finally slide off the field to the east at 12:00. Neil takes the first launch and lands right back. About 30 minutes later John launches and just barely stays up. I wait and watch the others launch early and struggle around the field down low for about an hour. Finally they start to struggle away from the field and Cu's become visible to the west and Northwest. I finally launch at 2:45. Just off tow I call Mike Eppler and ask him to head for Crupper's Corners. A few minutes later I am in a good thermal and realize that I have launched quite a bit too late. The first thermal takes me about 3000 agl.

I head off west and get a good second climb. This one gets me to about 4000 agl and I head for Sterling telling Mike Eppler to do the same. I get to Sterling and the edge of the Cu's at about 2000 agl. After a few tense minutes I get a good climb to about 4500 agl again and then I am to the clouds. I watch 8A climbing about a mile SE of me. Now the race is on, I head north to Lyons, the clouds get stronger and I get to 6400 agl!!!! At Lyons I again watch 8A climbing about a mile behind me. A little of extra incentive to press on.

From here I raced north in textbook soaring conditions cruising at 80-90 mph and only stopping for climbs that looked to be 500 fpm or better. The miles ticked by like clock work and I rapidly leave Mike behind. North of Lyons I hear Steve call his position at St. Johns. I gave serious thought to turning more west and radioed Mike that I was going to go north west. A few minutes later though the clouds to the north seemed MUCH better and considering the time of day I figured I would probably run out of day before clouds no matter which direction. I decided to keep the wind at my back and raced on north. The terrain around Elsworth was a bit forbidding by I blasted by it with hardly a downward glance. South of Beloit I spotted Green Base, John Wells' crew. I called them on the radio "4J to Green Base, Beware Falling Bondo..." They answered back, "There is a great field just ahead if you need to land!" I replied, "I don't think so." and dove off to the next good Cu. As I climbed back to cloud base I called back to Mike "4J Climbing east of Beloit, setting up for a pee-bag attack on Green Base."

I raced North to the Nebraska border under the beautiful cloud street reaching the state line at about 5:00. John Wells had called out "I'm a Cornhusker" at least an hour ago. It would take a huge piece of luck to catch him. As I crossed into Cornhusker territory myself I started to seriously consider the terrain for landing. The clouds ahead were very much weaker looking. I set the speed ring to zero and slowed way down. I followed the best looking clouds for the next ten miles or so hoping to get at least once more to cloud base. The end of the cloud street was a particularly nice looking cloud and I remained confident that I would get back up. I finally reached the last cloud at under 2000 feet. All

around were cornfields and just one plowed strip that looked fit to land in. One mile east was the town of Oak. A crop duster was spraying a mile northeast of my emergency field. I searched with increasing desperation for lift finding only zero sink. I was tempted to push on a bit farther north but there were NO landing choices ahead. I sank slowly lower. At a thousand feet I was over town and getting nervous about the crop duster. At about 700 I finally gave up on the cloud and headed for my field. I radioed to my crew "Four Juliet is going down." Harry Clayton in 8A offered to stand by and relay. A little bump and I circled a couple of turns down to about 500 feet, but the crop duster was really starting to make me nervous. Finally with a heavy sigh I put the gear down and entered downwind. The field was probably 1500 feet long with a ditch running east/west through the middle. The field was mostly surrounded by trees but had corn off a narrow strip of the approach end. I came in over the corn and floated across the ditch coming down full stall just on the other side. I rolled about 50 feet and was stopped. Harry relayed my position to my crew, and then it was time to go meet the owner of the farm.

With some trepidation I walked to the farm house. Two cars and a dog were out front, the cars were a good sign but the dog didn't seem to friendly. I tried the doorbell and knocked with no response, and then went inside the front porch to knock with my hat in hand. The door opens and I explain that I just landed in the field and was wondering if I could use the phone? I was greeted with the usual brief puzzled look and then a warm invitation to come in. I was treated to air conditioning, ice cold drinks and a phone, truly wonderful hospitality. I sat and visited with Mrs Bondegard and her daughter for an hour or so. We went out to see the glider and about then Mike arrived with the trailer at about the same time as Mike Bondegard and his sons. I let them each take a turn in the glider and got a picture of it in the pasture, then loaded the glider in the trailer. The Bondegard's treated us to another drink and we headed home. Little did I know the fun had just begun.

We went south on Highway fourteen to I-70, went west on I-70 about 3 miles and then back south. As we got off of I-70 we both heard a scraping noise. Mike stopped the van and I got out to investigate. Oh shit. The trailer door had come opened. I looked in the trailer and see THE FUSELAGE IS NOT IN THE TRAILER!!!!!!! I felt sick. The chances that the fuselage was intact had to be about nill. I pictured it in my mind hit by a car or wrapped around a tree after exiting the trailer at 70 mph. We closed the trailer and raced back down the Interstate. Where was the fuselage? In the pitch dark night how would we even find it if it went off the road? Mike suggested that as little damage as there was to the trailer door it could not have been opened for long. We got back off the interstate and decided the most likely place for the glider to be and to be in one piece was near the on ramp. If it was on the Interstate it would already be destroyed so we would start looking there. Mike yelled out "I saw a flash of white in the headlights in the ditch next to the on ramp!" I ran up the ramp and Mike got in the van. As he drove up the ramp the headlights lit up the fuselage. There it sat in the middle of the on ramp halfway up the slope, upright, pointing straight up the ramp, not a scratch. Just as if we had gently unloaded it there. I was so relieved I stood in the road and laughed out loud at my incredible luck. We stowed the fuselage again and found some wire to safety the trailer latches which I had trusted so well for the last 13 years. All I lost was about a year of life to fright.

The rest of the trip home was uneventful. It turned out that John Wells won landing at Central City with a distance of 220 miles. Dennis Brown was second at McCook. Steve was third at Hooker Oklahoma and Harry Clayton fourth at Harvard airport. I was fifth at Oak Nebraska with a distance of about 160 miles. The flight had lasted 2 hours and forty five minutes.