

Soar Point: Ridge Soaring in the Eastern USA—November 2018

Chris R. Burger

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My flying career took a downward turn during 2017. Most of my flying had dried up, and I worried that my flying skills might atrophy to the extent that I would not be able to recover them if needed. I guess I was vulnerable, and Louw van Zyl relentlessly pounced on me. He convinced me to start gliding.

Don't get me wrong: I'd always been interested, and I've always regarded gliding as a wonderful way to hone one's flying skills. I've even had a few glider flights, and attended a wave flying camp in 1988. It's just that I've never had the time nor the money for such extravagant pastimes. This time I could rationalise my objections away. It was now a career move.

Over a period of about a year, I set about learning the art of gliding. I studied the available literature, did some flight training with Louw, flew in a competition with Louw, got my gliding licence and instructor rating and submerged myself in the process of learning the finer points of the sport. All the time, I was trying to figure out how to incorporate these newly-learned skills into my existing flight training portfolio.

It soon became evident that there is no consensus on the finer points of glider training. Traditionally, South African glider pilots were managed by a sporting body, while other pilots have been formally regulated by the Civil Aviation Authority and its predecessors, under the auspices of the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) and the Department of Transport. Even now, glider pilot licencing has not been incorporated into the mainstream regulatory environment.

I encountered differences of opinion on the background that a glider instructor needs. Some countries emphasise theoretical and practical teaching skills, but the local stance seems to be that copious gliding experience magically turns you into a great instructor. Unfortunately, I saw several obvious counter-examples.

I resolved to find a mentor of international standing and experience who could provide me with some answers. An extensive Web search netted Tom Knauff, a Soaring Hall of Fame member who has operated a commercial gliding operation in central Pennsylvania with his wife Doris Grove (a Hall of Fame member in her own right) since 1975. He has held five world soaring records. His 1647 km out-and-return flight of 1983 remained the world record for two decades and is still the US record. He was the first person to exceed 1000 km with a passenger. He held over 50 US national gliding records, many of which still stand. More importantly, at least from my point of view, is Tom's standing as instructor. Tom has written over 15 gliding training manuals, many with Doris as a co-author. For many years, he was a pilot examiner, and one of few authorised to issue initial instructor certificates. This privilege is normally reserved for FAA



Tom Knauff (National Soaring Museum picture).

inspectors. His instructor refresher clinics come highly recommended. Tom trained NASA's early Shuttle astronauts in preparation for flying the world's heaviest glider. He did the stunt flying for *The Thomas Crown Affair* in 1999. Tom founded the Soaring Safety Foundation many years ago, and continues to write and talk about glider safety. He also founded the annual Seniors gliding contest in Florida around 1991.

There was some doubt, though. Ridge Soaring Gliderport has been in the market for some time, and it wasn't clear that things were still in full swing. We exchanged emails, and I was relieved to get a prompt reply. I had a phone conversation with Tom in September. The biggest logistical problem was the weather. Tom indicated that they were experiencing the wettest year in the history of the gliderport, and it would be hard to find a gap in the weather to fly. He also indicated that the ridge soaring season was expected to continue to mid-November. The pressure was on.

For the next month, I watched the daily weather forecasts for Julian, Pennsylvania, like a hawk. The weather was indeed lousy. Most weeks featured no more than one day of sunshine. It was going to be very difficult indeed to find a suitable window before mid-November. Mid-October, I took a decision. Given that the gliderport might not be around forever, it was now or never. I resolved to make two weeks available, to ensure that there would at least be a few flyable days, and bought my plane tickets for a week hence. The game was now on.

My highest priority was to learn the ropes in glider instruction. A close second was to get myself qualified as a glider instructor in the USA. I wanted to experience the process and see what was involved to become an ICAO-compliant instructor. I would first have to add commercial glider privileges to my existing US Airline Transport Pilot certificate, then add glider privileges to my existing Certificated Flight Instructor certificate.

There were a few other goals too. Probably the most important was a visit to the United Nations headquarters in New York. The precinct is not part of the USA, making it a separate country for travel purposes. It would be my 96th country. I was also hoping to visit a few new states, and to revisit some existing states where I'd only made fleeting visits in the past. Pennsylvania was a prime example. I'd been there once before, but for only a few hours. Now, I was hoping to complete my checklist: spend seven nights there, drive a car there, fly a plane there and operate ham radio from there. I also wanted to get authorization to tow gliders and to use all the different launch types in gliders; aerotow, winch and self-launch.

I had a list of places to visit. Harris Hill in upstate New York was right at the top of my list, as my friend Hal Lund had been a gliding instructor there. It was the site of the first serious soaring in North America, and is now the site of the National Soaring Museum. I noticed on the map that Lock Haven, the site of the original Piper factory, was near Julian. I had a list of long-time radio friends and acquaintances that I wanted to meet. In the same vein, I wanted to see some of the big contest radio stations and visit DX Engineering, the prime vendor of components for competitive amateur radio. Finally, I was hoping to catch a Parkrun somewhere in the USA.

It was going to be a tall order. The weather was my biggest challenge, but I expected to spend a lot of time working with Tom and then going through the examination process. With all the theory work on the ground, at least I wouldn't be bored on the days when flying was not possible. And, of course, things are far apart in the USA and with the low speed limits, I would probably spend a lot of time on the road.

Getting there

Flying to the USA is a test of endurance. The SAA flight is by far the quickest to Washington, with a mere 17 hours *en route*. The flight stopped in Dakar, Senegal to refuel. I would have loved to step off the plane and set foot on Senegalese territory, as it is a country I haven't set foot in before, but previous experience taught me the TSA¹ would frown upon such audacity. I sat in the plane yet again, longingly staring at the tarmac.

This trip felt even longer than usual. I had contracted a cold just a day before departure. It got a whole lot worse after boarding, and I spent the entire flight coughing almost continuously. It was unpleasant for me, but it must have been even worse for my neighbours. Fortunately, the flight was relatively empty and there was an open seat next to my window seat.

Washington DC

I arrived feeling very sorry for myself. I dragged myself through the terminal and collected my rental car. Here, a nasty surprise awaited me. I had to rent an EZ-Pass transponder for road tolls, the cost of which exceeded that of the rental car! I decided to take it, as I could not afford to have my mobility hampered. I didn't know how much driving I might have to do. I was perturbed to find that my South African phone didn't work. My American phone did, but would not accept my South African SIM. Unless I could find a solution, I would be without my South African phone for the duration of the trip.

My next step was to tour Washington DC, a city I'd never been to. The Metro appeared to be the best way to get there, so after some shopping I drove to a nearby station and caught a train into downtown. I was still feeling miserable and coughing my lungs out, and in my scattered state managed to become the first tourist in history to visit downtown Washington DC without a camera. I was intrigued to learn that the Marine Corps Marathon was going to be run in the city the very next day.

With my limited energy, I decided to focus on the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum. I walked down Independence Avenue in freezing air, spent about an hour browsing the museum and then cruised back along The Mall to the station. After an inadvertent detour on the train, I arrived back at my car and hit the road.

Maryland and the contest

My first stop would be Maryland. I headed to the famous W3LPL contest station². The World Wide DX Contest would start at 20:00 local time, shortly after sunset. I arrived about 90 minutes before the contest. I knew that they didn't take the Phone contest very seriously, but I also didn't want to be a nuisance. I announced my arrival and despite an invitation to stay for the contest, I announced that I would depart at the start of the contest. I made some contacts on 7 MHz³ while the equipment was being set up, and introduced myself to a few of the operators. I also chatted to two of the regulars that I knew. I was rather surprised to see hired gun Sandy Raeker⁴ there. She was probably surprised too, as she couldn't place me, and I asked her in my fluent broken German what the German police force was doing there. At 20:00, I jumped into my car in search of accommodation for

¹ The US Transportation Security Administration.

² <https://www.qrz.com/db/w3lpl>

³ Amateur radio callsign N3EZ, from Maryland, Delaware and Pennsylvania.

⁴ Callsign DL1QQ.

the night. I found a cheap motel (or at least a lousy motel at too high a price) and coughed myself to sleep.

Delaware

The next morning, I got up pretty late and headed southeast towards Delaware. The Contest was now in full swing, but I still decided to stop by at Jon Zaimes's place⁵. We had made dozens of



contacts over the years, but never met in person. I knew it wasn't going to be a real meeting, as Jon would be busy in the contest. I arrived at his house and walked around the house to look at the antennas. I attracted attention, and Jon's wife Jeanie⁶ gingerly came to the door. I explained who I was, and she briefly let me into the radio room to say hello. Jon greeted me briefly, but I urged him to keep going. Jeanie and I chatted for half an hour or so before I set off to their son's house.

Jon Zaimes AA1K taking a micro-break from the contest.

Adam⁷ is on the outskirts of Dover. I spent an hour or two with him, and also got to make a few contacts in the contest. Adam has invisible antennas on the edge of a forest, so making those contacts required some resolve. I headed north around sunset to find a place to sleep. I found it amazing that I could cruise at the speed limit and see all the traffic whizzing by, much faster than I was. Clearly, speed limits are not a big thing in Delaware.



Adam Zaimes N3TTT in his station.

I settled down at Newark in the north. The weather forecast indicated that Tuesday would be the only flyable day for at least a week, so I had to rearrange my plans. I had to arrive early on Monday, to give me enough time to study and talk to Tom before flying on the next day.

Pennsylvania

Several weeks before my trip, I exchanged emails with Dale Long⁸. I'd mentioned to him that I'd be around, and we tentatively agreed that I'd stop by when I was in his vicinity. Although I'd be passing through his part of Pennsylvania today, I wasn't very hopeful that he'd be around. The CQ World Wide DX Contest attracts most serious radio amateurs, and I had no illusions that he'd be in a mood to socialise. I was therefore pleasantly surprised when he contacted me just about when I was passing through his neighbourhood. I turned north and soon arrived in front of his house. He took

⁵ Callsign AA1K.

⁶ Callsign AB1P.

⁷ Callsign N3TTT.

⁸ Callsign N3BNA.

me on a guided tour of the town, displaying its German heritage. We found a restaurant and sat down for a leisurely chat. I made a few contacts from his house, my first from this state. I asked about Dale's welfare projects, and learned that he'd lived in Zaire (now the DRC) for some years. When he mentioned his Mennonite association, I asked him if he happened to know Jon and Carolyn Rudy⁹. I'd met them many years before, when they lived in Swaziland. They visited me in Pretoria, and I visited them near Mbabane. I really enjoyed their family, but later lost touch when they lived in the Philippines and later moved back to the USA. Imagine my surprise when Dale told me that he knew the Rudys, and that they lived in the same area. I spoke to Jon on the phone. Unfortunately he was busy for the day.

I eventually decided to postpone my departure to the morning, and spent a delightful evening with the Rudys. Both their sons are now professional pilots. Apparently, my visit to Swaziland in a light plane so many years ago had left a lasting impression.

Coincidentally, they both fly the Hawker, the same aircraft type that I fly occasionally. I left early in the morning to arrive at the Ridge Soaring Gliderport as early as possible.



Dale Long N3BNA.



Jon and Carolyn Rudy, K3QF and K3CIP.

Julian Gliderport

I spent the day working through documents that Tom had given me, answering all the quizzes and reading his training syllabi. It was a tall order, working through hundreds of pages of study material while still struggling with the tail-end of my cold.

I was gratified to see that everything made a lot of sense to me. Early Tuesday, I discussed my findings with Tom and asked many questions. We were ready to fly when the tow pilot arrived.

The ridge was not working well, with the wind coming from the right direction but not strong enough to generate strong lift. Tom and I did two flights to cover the entire syllabus that I would have to demonstrate to the examiner—once as would-be commercial pilot and once as would-be instructor. After the second flight, Tom declared himself satisfied. As I would have

to do a minimum of three flights to meet the legal requirements for the test, we did a third flight to at least get a taste of what the ridge could produce. We spent about 40 minutes buzzing up and down the ridge. The most memorable event in that flight was a period of several minutes in which we flew just above and behind a bald eagle. It's an impressive animal, and watching it fly at such close range is a privilege that few have enjoyed. Despite the bad ridge day, it was much easier to stay up than I was accustomed to. As Tom had other things to do, I offloaded him and took a two-

⁹ Callsigns K3QF and K3CIP. Jon was 3DA0CA when I originally met them.

hour solo flight up and down the ridge. It was the easiest two-hour glider flight I've ever done, by far. I could have kept going all day, but I decided to land and complete my studies for the examination that I would soon have to undergo.

Unfortunately, there was a problem. The examiner they normally use was unavailable, and they could not find any examiners in the vicinity. Several phone calls were made to the FAA's district office, but no immediate answer came to light. In the meantime, the bad weather had returned.

We spent the evening in a local restaurant in nearby State College. Tom and Doris were joined by their visitors from Germany and South Africa, as well as regular Doug Haluza, his son and the son's girlfriend. The latter two are post-graduate students at Penn State. It was a pleasant evening, and many tall stories were told. I was amazed to learn that Tom and Doris had both grown up close by. Doris related how she'd moved in with Tom's family as a schoolchild, displacing Tom from his bedroom. Tom said that he is still trying to get even.

I decided to use the opportunity to make a side trip to DX Engineering in eastern Ohio. Wednesday saw a seven-hour drive, mostly in heavy rain. Only the National Public Radio and the cruise control made it palatable. On arrival, Tim Duffy¹⁰ roped me into a live Facebook interview for DX Engineering customers. The world of social media is somewhat beyond me, and I was amazed at how many people were watching on a workday. I also allowed Tim to bully me into buying a radio. On the return journey, I spent an hour or so looking around K3LR, Tim's super contest station¹¹, to get some hints on station building. One thing never ceases to amaze me about US stations: the total lack of security. A station like that would not last a day in these parts!

I arrived back at the Gliderport around midnight.



Two of the K3LR Christmas trees at dusk.

Off to Virginia

The FAA's best solution was an examiner in Roanoke, Virginia, more than 500 km and five hours away. I spoke to John Molumphy on the phone. He was very helpful, but could not travel to Julian. He also only flew on weekends. Fortunately, their club would be able to provide the necessary facilities for my test, and the weather forecast for the weekend was favourable, so I planned to arrive there by Friday night.

But first there were some other sights to see. The first stop was nearby Lock Haven to see the original Piper factory and the Piper Museum. I spent an hour or two floating around the exhibits, fondly thinking back to some of the hundred-odd Piper aircraft I've flown. The next stop was Harris Hill in upstate New York. This hill formed the centre of the first serious soaring activity in the USA, and was the venue for the first thirteen National Soaring Contests from 1930 to 1949. The Schweizer brothers produced a large share of the nation's training gliders in nearby Elmira. More personally,

¹⁰ Callsign K3LR.

¹¹ <http://k3lr.com>

my friend Hal Lund¹² was once an instructor at the factory's flight school, flying around 1500 flights as a glider instructor and 1500 flights as a tug pilot there.



Jeff Hartley N8II and his tower.

I spent Thursday night in West Virginia. On Friday morning, I finally felt that my cold had subsided sufficiently that I could try a run. I traversed the town near my hotel for about an hour before proceeding to Harpers Ferry, which the guidebook claimed was the only worth-while sight in the entire state. Afterwards, I briefly visited nearby radio amateur Jeff Hartley¹³, another long-term radio acquaintance that I'd never met in person. He didn't have a lot of time between appointments, so I set course to the southwest. I settled into a cheap motel in Roanoke for the night, arriving at the New Castle gliderport by 08:00 on Saturday.

The Blue Ridge Soaring Society¹⁴ has a great thing going. A lush grass runway nestles between two ridges, both of which can produce great lift when the wind blows. Great equipment with great hangars and a great clubhouse in lush surroundings along with great guys making great company complete a very pleasant picture. I had the opportunity to fly an ASK21, a much more recent version of the Ka7 and ASK13 that I've flown in South Africa. After I'd completed a two-hour oral exam with John, I flew with Gary Naber to acquaint myself with the glider and the area. Like in Pennsylvania, it was easy to soar up and down the ridge while the wind was blowing. Things went well, and after one flight Gary and John agreed that I was ready for the Commercial flight test. We flew for about half an hour, making good use of the ridge lift, and John took care of the paperwork before assuming his tow pilot duties for the day. With Commercial privileges in the bag, the first major hurdle was out of the way.



The ASK21 follows the CallAir A9 into the air.

¹² Callsign ZS6WB.

¹³ Callsign N8II.

¹⁴ <http://brss.net/>



Cheryl, Jerry, Gary, Chris and Kyle in Bibo's.

At the end of the day's gliding, five of us set off for Bibo's, the Italian restaurant in New Castle. Gary, Kyle, Jerry and Cheryl made great company, with many amazing aviation tales doing the rounds. I spent the night in the clubhouse, an old-style wooden farmhouse filled with flying memorabilia. I took some time to study some aspects of the regulations that I would need for the following morning's instructor exam before getting a great night's sleep.

Sunday's oral exam came to an abrupt halt. I was exempt from any exams required for the Commercial privileges, but John showed me that there was an exam that I needed to pass for the instructor certificate. I decided to head outside the valley in search of mobile phone coverage, as my AT&T phone had no signal. Once outside the valley, I made some phone calls and quickly determined that none of the nearby exam centres were open on a Sunday.

I decided to head south to North Carolina for the exam. I would use the rest of Sunday to briefly visit Kentucky and then spend the night in Tennessee, as close to North Carolina as possible so that I could write the exam the following morning. I cruised westwards, gawking at the scenery and enjoying the NPR. Emerging from the Cumberland Gap tunnel, I found myself in Kentucky for the first time. And as one would expect, the very first shop I saw was a KFC. As I only had a few minutes to spend in Kentucky, I decided to have some KFC. I can state categorically that KFC is as bad in Kentucky as it is elsewhere, only bigger.

Johnson City is the easternmost major town in Tennessee. I spent the night there, and took a 10 km run the next morning. It didn't go too badly, so the cold was eventually releasing its grip on me. I called an exam centre in Winston-Salem, and agreed with Molly that I would arrive by 13:00. I almost didn't make it, as the roads from Johnson City wind through gorgeous mountainous terrain, but don't exactly allow high speeds. NPR was less agreeable than usual. Instead of documentary programmes about the last surviving WW-II soldier or stomach flora throughout the world or subtleties of linguistics, I had to listen to incessant analysis of the upcoming mid-term elections. At least the quotes from the campaigning president provided some entertainment value, if only to remind me of the level of discourse we had grown accustomed to under our previous president.

I arrived just before 13:00, and spent more than an hour trying to convince Molly that I could write the exam with a South African address. Even my FAA certificates with my address boldly embossed on them didn't convince her. Finally, with help from their company headquarters in California, I was able to start writing the exam. 17 minutes later, I was out of there.

South Carolina

I didn't get 100% on the exam, so I had to solicit the help of an instructor before reporting for the oral instructor exam. I decided to visit Kyle Adams in South Carolina. Kyle is an instructor at New Castle, and also a radio amateur¹⁵. Kyle has wide experience in a wide array of aircraft, including multi-engine seaplanes and jets. I didn't have a phone number for him, but I could look up his address in the FCC database, so I drove down to South Carolina to go and find him. He wasn't home,



Gary Dixon K4MQG in his station.

so I sat in a restaurant with free WiFi. I found a list of licenced radio amateurs in Rock Hill on the municipality's Web site, and soon noticed that there were several of my long-term radio contacts in town. I drove to Gary Dixon's house, and found Gary and Carol¹⁶. home. Gary and I have worked together on projects since the late Eighties, but never met in person. We had a lot to reminisce about. The couple had decided at the last minute not to go out for the evening, and I spent a delightful evening with them. I made a few contacts from his station¹⁷, my first from South Carolina.

In the morning, Gary gave me a guided tour of his antenna farm. I drove to Kyle's house nearby, and we spent a couple of hours researching the topics I'd erred on in my exam. We had some lively debates. Around lunchtime, I hit the road to return to New Castle for my instructor test. I met John at a fire station, where he is a long-time volunteer, to conduct the oral exam. This time I had the necessary piece of paper, and the oral exam went off without any problems. We had some stimulating discussions. As it was dark by the time we finished, we agreed to continue the practical test the next day.



Kyle Adams, who helped me with the exam theory.

¹⁵ Callsign N4ICW.

¹⁶ Callsigns K4MQG and KA4WUR.

¹⁷ Callsign N3EZ/4.



John Molumphy, the examiner who pulled together all the arrangements to get me tested.

Wednesday started with an 11 km run on the outskirts of Salem. I met John at the airport around 11:00. He had taken time off his busy schedule as a judge to help me during mid-week, as Wednesday appeared to offer the only respite in the weather. We were towed aloft by Kevin Kochersberger, who had also travelled to the airfield especially to help us get airborne. A single launch proved to be enough, as I did some demonstrations and then allowed John to fly while I was supposed to assess and correct his performance to prove my prowess as an instructor. John maintains that all the errors in his flying were deliberate. Either way, after our landing we put the glider and towplane away and filled in lots of papers. Like with the Commercial test, he punched a nasty hole in my previous FAA certificate to demonstrate that it was now history. Instead, I now had a brand-new temporary certificate with glider privileges.

John had to run off to meet professional commitments, so I asked Kevin to help me with the signoff required to act as tow pilot. Kevin wasn't comfortable with the idea, so we agreed instead to meet at his lab at nearby Virginia Tech, where we had lots of common professional interests to discuss. I drove down to the campus and spent a very interesting hour or two looking over his work, and discussing possibilities for future cooperation. He works on projects in Malawi, and also works in policy writing for Unmanned Aircraft operations. We may well end up doing things together in future.

Looking for Mr Wright

With the Commercial glider privileges and instructor certificate in hand, I could now start thinking along more leisurely lines. My first thought was to fly in West Virginia, and to spend another night there. Doing so would help my States statistics significantly. However, I had been trying to phone a nearby flight instructor for a day or so, with no luck. I made a final effort to contact him, then decided to give up. It was a pity—apart from missing out on an opportunity to fly in that state, I would also have liked to talk to David about his overseas missionary involvement.

With that door closed, I looked further afield. My main constraint was that I wanted to arrive in New York City during office hours on Friday, as I wanted to tour the United Nations Headquarters building. And there was one major omission in the vicinity that I could simply rectify: I hadn't spent a night in North Carolina. I figured I had just enough time to make it to Kitty Hawk and back to New York. It would be a tall order, but it was worth a try.

Kitty Hawk is the place where the Wright Brothers made their first flights in 1903. There are earlier claims, but I had another reason why I wanted to see this particular site. Completely by coincidence, I made my flying school's first flight at Kitty Hawk (Gauteng) on 17 December 2003. It was exactly a century, to the day, after the Wrights made their first flight at Kitty Hawk (North Carolina) on 17 December 1903. I simply had to go and check this place out.

I arrived in the Kitty Hawk area just before midnight. All the motels were closed, with no response to my phone calls. When I finally found myself in front of a campsite, and the campsite was very much closed for the winter, I realised that my car would have to suffice. I dressed warmly, tilted the driver seat back and snuggled up in my sleeping bag for the night. The patter of continuous rain helped me

to fall asleep. The rain also made it very uncomfortable when I had to extricate myself from the sleeping bag in the middle of the night with an unsettled tummy. A nocturnal excursion in the rain is not much fun when the temperature hovers close to freezing. I was ready to go before 07:00, and drove to the Wright Brothers Memorial, only to find that it would only open at 09:00. I did some shopping and unsuccessfully looked for breakfast before being let in through the gate at 09:00 sharp. I toured the museum and the outdoor exhibits, including the Kill Devil Hill memorial, the 1903 statue and the replica of their workshop and hangar. I kept glancing over at the adjacent runway. First Flight Airport is in the same State park where the Wright Brothers memorial is, and not even 300 m from the site of the original flights. I knew that I would hate myself for the rest of my life if I didn't fly there.

Having seen all there is to see at the museum, I asked my GPS to take me to the nearest airport. Dare County Airport is only about 10 km south of First Flight Airport, but it takes a lot more driving to get there. It involves a drive along the Outer Banks, then a drive onto Roanoke Island, then some vague directions from someone in the terminal building, then a maze of little roads before one arrives in front of the correct gate. A phone call to the number on the gate nets a promise that someone will soon arrive. And someone does, in the form of instructor Luke Williams. He appeared a little uncertain about this foreigner who wanted to fly for a few minutes in the prevailing wind, but at least I knew that no young instructor could resist forever. Unfortunately, they didn't have a tailwheel-rated instructor handy, so I had to settle for a lowly Cessna 150. We set off against the northeasterly wind, making little headway and spending an excruciatingly long time over water. I took a detour to stay close to land, something which Luke clearly found amusing. He also found it amusing when I forgot to turn off the carb heat before landing. These jet jocks...



Kill Devil Hill from the air, with First Flight Airport in the background, the museum on the right and raindrops all over.

I landed at First Flight, taxied back, took some pictures and then took off to return to Deer County. This time, with the wind from behind, we crossed the water in record time. I settled the bill and jumped back into my car, intending to head north to New York City.

Heading North

Internet directions state that it takes almost eight hours of driving in the absence of traffic. And, of course, I was going to pass through several big cities, making it utterly unlikely that there would be no significant traffic. I punched Bob Eshleman's address into my GPS. Bob is one of the world's premier amateur radio operators¹⁸, and we have been in intermittent contact since the early Eighties. He lives near Richmond, Virginia, not too far off my planned route. I didn't have a phone number for him, and my email enquiry of a few days before had gone unanswered. I hadn't gone very far when my phone rang. It was Bob. He sounded a little surprised that I gave him an ETA right away, but of course he had no way of knowing that I was actually already on my way to his house! He sounded very keen to meet me, and indicated that his wife and possibly his son would join us at a restaurant for the evening. It promised to be a good day. I indicated that I wouldn't be able to stay very long, as I was planning to proceed to Washington DC that night, ready to hit New York City in the morning.



Bob Eshleman W4DR in his station, with the De Soto Cup in the background.

Things didn't go according to plan. Apart from dense traffic along the route that kept shifting my arrival time, I also started feeling distinctly queasy. On arrival, I was downright miserable. Meeting someone important at his front door and then immediately asking to use the restroom is not a very dignified start. It got worse. Once at the restaurant, I had to repeatedly excuse myself. I'm afraid I could not have

been very good company. Rosalie¹⁹ eventually talked

me into staying the night. It wasn't that hard to convince me, as I'm pretty certain I would not have made it all the way to Washington in that state. Instead, I made a few radio contacts from Virginia²⁰ and jumped into bed early.

The next morning, I was fine. We had a hearty breakfast, Bob showed me his antennas and I hit the road. I was a little later than planned, as I hadn't set my alarm clock in the interests of a good night's sleep. Although my GPS promised that I would arrive in NYC just before close of business, I knew that the traffic would upset my plans. I decided to get as close to NYC as possible, and then to position myself for the following morning's Parkrun if I wasn't going to arrive in office hours. I

¹⁸ Callsign W4DR. Bob received 5BDXCC #1 as W4QCW.

¹⁹ Callsign N4CFL.

²⁰ Callsign N3EZ/4.

arrived near Somerset, New Jersey, around sunset. I explored the surroundings of the Delaware and Raritan Canal Parkrun²¹ before finding a nearby hotel for the night. I found a list of local radio amateurs and found someone whose callsign I recognised. I drove to his house. It wasn't exactly a cordial reception. We spent a few minutes chatting at his front door before I headed back to the hotel.

I was up around 07:30 on Saturday, ready for the Parkrun. I spent about half an hour warming up and scouting out the park. Cars only started arriving a few minutes before the scheduled start. The start turned out to be near a different bridge to the one I had scouted out. They had had their biggest-ever field the previous week, mostly with runners warming up for the New York City Marathon the next day. This field was a lot smaller. I was pleased, as I wasn't as likely to be lured into bolting to self-destruction. I ran in third place for most of the route. We ran out for 2,5 km, then turned around and ran back along the same path. We then had to cross a bridge to the finish. Another runner overtook me around the 4 km mark, and I steamed home in fourth place. It was a full two minutes faster than my previous best Parkrun. I was astonished, but in retrospect I shouldn't have been. It was at sea level. The temperature was a scant 6°C. The path is perfectly level, mostly with a good surface. There was very little traffic. Nevertheless, I now sit with a problem: How will I ever beat my personal best Parkrun again?



As I was starting to run low on supplies, and couldn't find a place to replenish my stocks in this rural town, I stopped at a McDonalds on the way back to the hotel. As unlikely as it sounds, the menu in the USA is even more ghastly than in South Africa. There wasn't a single item on the menu that I wanted to subject my endocrine system to. I went hungry instead.

Looking for a flat Parkrun? You can't do better than this one!

The Big Apple

I enjoyed the ride into New York City. The skyline is truly amazing, and there are many bridges spanning bright-blue water. I went through several tunnels, then crawled through congested streets on the way to the United Nations. I was impressed by how tall the buildings were, and how little space there sometimes was between them. I found a "half-hour special" at an underground parking garage, then jogged off to the UN HQ. As expected, there was no tourist access to the premises on Saturdays. However, I found a place where I could stick my foot under the fence and set foot in the

²¹ <http://www.parkrun.us/delawareandraritancanal/results/weeklyresults/?runSeqNumber=13>

premises. Just to be sure, I engaged a security guard in a conversation about tourist options. I hope he didn't notice that I gradually danced around him until my foot was firmly planted inside the gate, and that I shot a picture of that foot while we were talking. I was satisfied—I made my way back to the car with plenty of time to spare before the half-hour ultimatum would elapse.

The next stop was the Met Opera. I was hoping to attend a performance there, but with only one day in NYC it wasn't to be. There didn't seem to be any performances during that period. I was dismayed to notice that our local girl Pretty Yende was scheduled to debut in Bizet's Pearlfishers only four days later! Clearly my timing needs some work. I drove around the Lincoln Center to get a first-hand look for myself, before heading east towards Queens. The Saturday morning traffic wasn't too bad, and I stopped in front of my next port of call in the early afternoon.



Adrian, Myra and Chris. Despite appearances, the cat doesn't eat humans.

Adrian Ciuperca is a big-time traveler and radio operator²². I needed some fancy footwork to catch him at home, as he had just returned from a trip to Zimbabwe and was actually packing for his next trip to the Pacific. I had a great evening with Adrian and Myra. Of course, when I heard that Myra was from Transylvania, I had to relate one of my favourite stories that transpired there. They laughed politely. Maybe they even enjoyed

the story.

I was keen to make a few contacts from New York. Adrian doesn't have much of a station in his apartment, but he does have online access to several stations all across the USA. As there was a station close by that he has access to, I was able to operate from New York, although not exactly where I was sitting. It was an interesting experience. The browser-based user interface was a little clunky, but it was good enough to make some Morse code contacts into Europe²³. Had there been more time, I would have loved to have tried the slick interface, using a real radio as a remote panel.

Blairstown

I left around 09:00 for my 11:00 gliding appointment in Blairstown, New Jersey.

I made good progress until just short of the exit from Interstate 80. Here, we sat almost still for more than half an hour. I finally left the Interstate with just a few minutes to go, and arrived at the airport almost exactly on time. It turned out that everything was running late, though. Most of the other would-be fliers were still stuck in the same traffic. Nevertheless, there was frenetic activity as two gliders flew over and over. No-one seemed to be staying up longer than 15 minutes or so. The wind was blowing in the wrong direction, so the ridge was not working well.

²² Callsign KO8SCA.

²³ Callsign N3EZ/2.

As I had despaired of getting myself signed out as tow pilot, I simply wanted to use the opportunity to fly some Schweizer gliders. I've explained before that my friend Hal Lund had been an instructor at the Schweizer factory in Elmira, and I was keen to try out some of their hardware. Schweizers are almost completely unknown outside the USA. Jersey Ridge Soaring had four different Schweizer gliders, so there was ample opportunity. Brenda had explained to me on the phone that I would have to be tested on emergencies before being allowed to fly solo. As the several flights required would cost too much, I had resolved to stick to only one flight. However, I was very keen to try the single-seater Schweizer 1-26, and kept the door open to make it happen if at all possible. I flew with Mike Friedman, a local instructor who also turned out to be a radio amateur²⁴. Mike was thorough and pleasant, and we were soon following the Pawnee towplane into the winter sky. It was a rough ride. The strong wind didn't blow in the right direction to make the ridge work, and tended to destroy the few thermals that might have been present. We never had lift for more than a few seconds at a time, and it was hard work to stay up even for half an hour. The strong wind also made it hard to judge the approach, and we had to work hard to make it into the strip.



The Schweizer 2-33 ready for takeoff.

Although I wasn't exactly expecting a positive response, I asked Mike what I would have to do to be allowed to drive the 1-26. He immediately agreed that I could fly it. He reasoned that if I could handle those conditions on the first flight and stay up for half an hour, I was safe. I jumped at the chance. We untied the 1-26 and I followed the Pawnee into conditions even rougher than during the first flight. Despite the five-point harness, my head twice bumped against the canopy on the way up. It was again hard work to stay up, with no lift of any significant duration. I witnessed several club and

²⁴ Callsign WB2WNX.

school gliders going up and down during my 50-minute flight. I ran out of lift very suddenly, and headed back to the airfield. I was in a queue behind four other aircraft. The guy ahead of me stretched his downwind painfully, and I wondered for a while how I was going to stay behind him and still land on the field. All five of us landed within about 90 seconds, the two aeroplanes on the runway and the three gliders on the grass. Even while I was on final approach, I was cagey about a tow plane that was preparing to take off. I flew faster than usual and flew over him to ensure that he knew about me, then landed deep to stop near the glider's parking spot. Mike helped me to tie the aircraft down. I settled the bill and hit the road southbound, towards Washington DC. I was happy; I'd finally managed to fly some of those famous Schweizer gliders.

Washington DC

Conditions were again rainy, and traffic was dense. I arrived at Washington around 21:00, and found a cheap hostel just inside the boundaries of DC. The hostel looked like something from a ghost movie, with creaking, narrow stairs leading up and down to several rooms that had been turned into dorms. It was hard to find parking, and the spot I finally chose was only free until 06:30. I would have to move the car very early indeed. I spent about two hours making backups and doing some admin chores, then went to bed around midnight. One of my dorm-mates was, shall we say, a little disruptive. This Panamanian played with his cellphone the entire night, including shining the built-in light around the room. He loudly spoke to himself on an ongoing basis. Around 03:10, another room-mate arrived. They had a loud discussion for at least ten minutes. Around 04:30, the Panamanian started complaining loudly that a rodent had eaten some of his food. It didn't seem to occur to him that he had caused the problem by bringing his food up to the dorm. I left the room at 06:20 to move the car. I found another parking space a little further away, where I could leave my car until 09:00. I used the opportunity to take an hour-long run through the neighbourhood. I later realised that I'd traversed the border between DC and Maryland several times, mostly into leafy Takoma Park, Maryland. When I got back to my room, I was relieved to see that the Panamanian had left. I took a warm shower, packed my car and drove towards Dulles airport.



The ghost house in Washington DC.

I took a brief side-trip to the Udvar-Hazy aircraft collection. This collection is part of the Smithsonian Institution's Air and Space Museum, which I had seen on my trip to Washington on the first day. The collection consists mostly of aircraft too bulky to house in the downtown museum. There is an amazing array of around 160 aircraft, including a 707, a Space Shuttle and the Enola Gay, the B29 that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima in 1945. There are also some amazing oddities, like the Arado Blitz. I had seen the collection before and didn't have much time, so I took a quick trot through the collection with camera blazing, to get back to the car and beat the 30-minute free parking limit. I stopped at a Walmart to buy a suitcase and pack my stuff, then headed for the airport. I arrived a little late for my self-imposed arrival time, but soon realised that I was ridiculously early. I had misread the elapsed time on the rather cluttered confirmation document as the

departure time, and had around five hours to kill before departure. After checking in, I spent several hours making phone calls and catching up with email before boarding the long flight home. And it is a long flight. This time, we stopped in Accra, Ghana. At least I'd been to Accra many times, so there was no anguish about not being able to disembark at the fuel stop.

I arrived back at work around sunset, after travelling for more than 24 hours. I slept well that first night, and the following, but the time zone change manifested itself after a few days. For several nights, I would wake up after midnight and then simply stay wide awake for several hours. Let's hope it subsides one day.

Soar Point

I was very happy that I managed to get an ICAO-compliant commercial glider pilot certificate and instructor rating. I enjoyed my interactions with Tom and John, both experienced examiners with impeccable credentials, and with three other glider instructors. I would have liked to have gathered the necessary endorsements for flying a tow plane and for various launch types. However, those are relatively easy to gather in future, as they can be signed off by any normal instructor.

The touristy part of my trip turned out much better than expected. I had anticipated spending a lot of time in Pennsylvania. Instead, I had to venture much further afield to find the examiner. In the process, I visited at least five states that weren't in the planned itinerary. I've now seen 34 states, just over two-thirds. Maybe we'll complete that project yet!

Most importantly, though, I managed to calibrate the insights I've accumulated in my own glider training, based on my previous instruction experience on aeroplanes and helicopters, against international best practice. I've learned new tricks, and confirmed some insights that I'd already developed before. I feel that I now have a sound basis on which to build some great glider training.

I'll probably spend a few weeks frantically trying to catch up with everything that accumulated in my absence. I'll probably also smart from the costs for a few months. I'm also dealing with the fallout of being unreachable by cellphone for over two weeks. However, I don't regret the opportunity to learn from a legend and to figure out where glider training fits into the real world. It's been an exhilarating ride!