

**T H E R M A L   C A M P   2 0 0 9**  
**AIR SAILING GLIDERPORT, NEVADA**  
**A Photo Essay**

*by Paul McDonald*  
Northern California Soaring Association

For a newly rated glider pilot whose total experience has been within gliding distance of Byron, CA, the dynamics of soaring flight out of Air Sailing proved so new and different and thrilling. There was so much lift ... so much sink ... so much surface wind ... such rough tows ... such thin air. I flew nine flights during the weeklong camp, and I now number among those who have soared the Sierra Nevada mountain range! It was a memorable week during which much was learned and new friends were made.

I will not attempt to put into words the details of my introduction to mountain soaring. If ever there were an endeavor which could be better described by way of images than narrative, soaring is it. With this photo essay, I hope to help encourage those who have yet to sample Sierra soaring to consider training at Air Sailing Gliderport.

*The drive from Pleasanton took 3.7 hours. I would come to learn that glider flights of similar duration were not uncommon up here.*



In the middle of nowhere, but in our own backyard, we can fly in the Sierra sky.



Upon arrival, one is greeted by terrain whose presence is at once ominous and inviting.



Trailers are available for weekly rental.



Many choose to camp out.



The west bathhouse features two restrooms, two showers, and a laundry room.



The main clubhouse offers classroom and briefing space, a kitchen, plus restrooms and showers.



An ample hangar houses many based aircraft, including several fully rigged sailplanes.



From the cabana in this idyllic grotto, one can enjoy great views of ground and flight ops.

*Some choose to join Nevada Soaring Association (NSA), the tenant glider club at Air Sailing Gliderport, which has a fleet of gliders and a Pawnee towplane.*



These two Schweizer 2-33s are part of the NSA fleet.



The NSA fleet also includes Schweizer 1-26s, 1-36s, and a Pegasus.



Facing north, the paved portion of Runway 35 stands out, along with dirt overruns on both ends that make the total length well over a mile. Note the two diagonal runways, including R21L which has a paved portion, and R21R which is utilized primarily for towplane landings. There are several emergency landing locations in the vicinity of the gliderport.

*There were eleven trainees enrolled in the Thermal Camp, including 2 from Reno, 3 from the Bay Area, 2 from San Diego, and one each from Oregon, Washington, South Dakota, and Texas.*



Three H301 Libelles were being flown during the camp.



Our G102 ... tied down securely. Winds reached 30 knots at times out on the high desert.



The prettiest glider I saw all week: a 1-23, yellow with orange markings and white wings.



Puffy Cu ... the norm up here.



Sunset on Day One ...



My first flight was an area orientation sortie in this ASK21 with Instructor Mark Montague (pictured).

*The academics began with a briefing on operating gliders safely in and around Reno airspace. A Reno TRACON representative and our own Rolf Peterson supplied the details. Of course, the 28Aug06 Hawker/glider collision is still a hot topic. A recent near-collision between an A320 and a glider at 14,000 feet near Minden was also covered.*



One of two Piper Pawnee towplanes at ASI.



One local trainee had his first glider solo in this NSA SGS 2-33 while we were there.



My first flight in the G102 ...



... and I'm through ten-thousand feet on my way to a 3.2 hour flight.

*Other academic training included classes on thermal concepts and models, thermalling techniques, Macready theory, flying physiology, meteorology, soaring forecasts, density altitude, analyzing flights, glider performance, finding lift, off-field landings, retrieves, types of lift, and ridge soaring.*



You could just about reach up and touch the bases.



Southbound, with Pyramid lake to the east.



On the grid ... much of the week was unusually humid and overdeveloped.



Tule Ridge runs to the north, up the east side of the valley.



Northbound abeam the north shore of Pyramid Lake



Forming up on the ASK21

*The highlight of the week for me was Friday's planned outlanding on a dry lakebed. Flanigan Dry Lake is an alkali flat about 20NM NNW of ASI. Camp Staff would launch in the ASK21 and park in lift about halfway there. Trainees who tried for the dry lake were required to get clearance from the ASK at the halfway point before proceeding northward. On Thursday, I failed in the attempt. On Friday, I made it.*



Final glide to Flanigan Dry Lake.



Camp Director Rob Stone greets me on arrival.



Sierra-Sierra on the lakebed.



Given the recent rain, it was like landing on a pillow.



Here's my checklist.



Here I'm being towed off the dry lake ... through rain that was intermittent all week.

*Not unlike here at NCSA, ASI seems to run smoothly because of a cadre of passionate volunteers. Here are just a few of them.*



Bob Spielman - Chief Tow Pilot



Rob Stone - Director, Thermal Camp 2009



Mark Montague - Chief Instructor  
Tristan Armstrong - Flight Instructor



Stew Crane - Operations



Air Sailing Thermal Camp - Class of 2009

In the span of a week, Thermal Camp provided exposure to:

01. real thermal lift, just like the books describe it ... sustained and up to ten knots
02. real ridge lift ... imagine lowering the nose and covering a few miles at 75 knots without losing a foot
03. glider cross-country
04. off-field/dry lake bed landing and takeoff
05. high density altitude operations and high/gusty wind operations
06. good academic classes and great camaraderie

The staff at Air Sailing provides a valuable service with these camps, and I encourage those who have not trained in the mountains to consider doing so. I found that, compared to my experiences at Byron, there are more differences than there are similarities. It's a whole new course of training, and a whole new soaring experience.

Author John Joss had this to say in the introduction of his 1976 book Soarsierra:

"All around the world, wherever the soaring pilot dreams of massive Cu, teeming lenticular, and glorious cloud streets that point to the horizon, the Sierra comes to mind."

"Pilots new to the Sierra react to the environment almost as if struck by a physical blow."

"The Sierra Nevada is there, waiting for you. Every time you return there, you will learn something about geography and meteorology, about flight potential and physiology, about the extraordinary beauty of nature."

We're lucky to have it right up the road, and I look forward to flying there again.