

Final Glide to Nowhere?

by Paul E. Remde

It's 5:45 p.m. on Saturday, May 3, 1997 and I'm about 20 miles from my final destination, having traveled 300 miles already. I'm at 3000 ft AGL. With the 30 mph tailwind my glide computer is telling me that I can make it to the gliderport with 1500 ft to spare. So I start my final glide. I'm heading under some dark, flat clouds which are the back end of a rain storm. It's not raining where I am headed, but there is no sign of lift either. As I cruise along I start thinking about how I can't yet see my destination, and I start to remember how I came to have the GPS coordinates I'm headed toward.

It was a year earlier at the rained-out 1996 Region 7 Contest in Illinois. Before heading home I asked some local glider pilots where they fly – “just in case I ever fly down from Minnesota”. (Yeah... right. My longest flight so far was only 120 miles. To fly from Minnesota to the Chicago area would be a flight of more than 300 miles.). A member of the Chicago Glider Club in Minooka, IL gave me the GPS coordinates to their gliderport and said I should stop by sometime. I also got the coordinates for the Hinckley airport which is the home of another local glider operation. I wrote the GPS coordinates for the gliderports on a piece of scrap paper and stuffed it in my pocket. On the way home from the contest I entered the coordinates into my GPS. I was driving while I entered the coordinates into the GPS (not recommended) and I had taken down the numbers in a hurry, so I wasn't exactly sure that I had the information correct.

I arrived at Stanton Airport at 9:00 a.m. on Saturday, May 3, 1997. I had planned to attempt a 200 km or 300 km triangle if the weather cooperated. As I started to assemble my Schweizer 1-35c I noticed that the wind was a bit on the strong side. A storm had gone through the night before but the sun was out now. There weren't any cumulous clouds yet, but the soaring forecast looked very good. Don Ingraham arrived and started to rig his Std Jantar. We were both frustrated with the high winds because they would make local triangle flights difficult. I started to wonder if a downwind dash was in the cards. I called Steve Adkins at 10:30 to see if there was any chance he would be willing to crew for me if I went downwind. He said he would be glad to! Now I started to get excited. I had always wanted to do a long downwind flight, but had never been able to arrange a crew when the weather was right. Don agreed that it would be a lot of fun to go downwind so he convinced Jim Cunningham to crew for him. Now I was even more excited. A downwind dash with another glider on a fantastic soaring day with a 30 mph tailwind sounded great to me! When cumulous clouds started appearing at 11:30 I was almost ready to roll. I made the necessary preparations for a badge flight and was towed aloft at 12:04. I had declared my goal as the Chicago Glider Club. It was 320 miles away, but if the weather held out I might just make it. I was a little concerned that I would catch up with the weather that had come through the night before, but I knew that it would be fun trying. I headed downwind as soon as I reached the top of my first thermal. The lift was a little broken up by the wind, but it was strong at times. Cloudbase was at 5,000 ft AGL. Don towed up a few minutes after I did and headed downwind as well. He started out about 10 miles behind me.

As I headed downwind the lift got stronger and the clouds got higher. The wind was blowing me directly toward my destination at 30 mph. When I cruised between thermals at 6,000 ft AGL (7000 ft MSL) I was seeing 100 – 110 mph on the GPS. Wow! I was grinning from ear to ear. The first obstacle I encountered was the Mississippi. There was a large gap with no clouds along the river. The gap looked 30 miles wide. I gained as much altitude as possible before crossing the gap. I left the last bit of lift at 8,500 ft MSL and crossed the river at Prairie du Chien. I decided to cross there because the river was relatively narrow at that point and the city on the other side looked like a good place to find lift, even though there were no clouds for another 20 miles or so. I lost radio contact with my crew as I crossed the river. As I arrived over the city there was a small wisp which did have some lift under it. I climbed in the lift for a few minutes and headed toward the distant clouds. I didn't find any more lift for a long time. I found a little over a small town, but couldn't center it well enough to go up. I continued on and eventually found lift over the city of Platteville. I was glad the city had lift over it because I was down to 2,000 ft AGL and I didn't want to land out. The lift was hard to use, but it gradually carried me up. It got much easier to center as I reached 6,000 ft MSL and it eventually took me up to near 7,000 ft MSL. Shortly after that I finally reached the clouds again. The lift was much easier to find under the clouds. I got on a roll for about an hour. I would circle a few times under each cloud and then race over to the next cloud. The shadows on the ground made it easy to pick out cloud streets.

I had not seen Don since leaving Stanton, but we had been in radio contact the entire flight. It was fun talking to him but it was frustrating at times because he had passed me and was cruising under the clouds east of the river while I was struggling to get to them. He flew just a little to the left of the course line and I was about 10 miles to the right of it. It was fun talking to him about how fun this was (after I made it across the gap to the clouds) and we started to talk about how far we could make it if the weather stayed favorable. Don was starting to dream of making it to Ohio and it really seemed possible. It was only 3:30 and the lift should be good until 7 p.m. or so... who knows.

Shortly after that radio discussion the flying got tougher. The cloudbase was lower to the east and the lift was getting harder to find. Don radioed that he was trying to get around a rain storm near Chicago as I was getting low near the Rockford Airport. I eventually climbed back up to cloudbase (5,000 ft MSL) in weak lift as I heard Don radio that he was safely on the ground (near St. Charles). He had made it to the sunlight on the other side of the cloud, but had arrived too low to find lift. I couldn't see the storm he was going around because I was about 20 miles behind him, but I was beginning to see several rain clouds in my path as well.

I only had about 50 or 60 miles to go so I decided to try to wait in the sunlight upwind of the clouds. The lift was getting very weak. I decided to glide to the Hinckley airport. I was on the Northwest side of a big dark cloud that covered Hinckley. After a 10 mile glide I arrived at the Hinckley airport at 2,000 ft AGL. Then I had a decision to make. There was sunlight about 1 mile to the south of the airport. I knew that if I couldn't find lift in the sunlight I would not be able to make it back to Hinckley because I would be

heading into a 30 mph headwind. But I also knew that if there was lift in the sunlight I would probably be able to make it to my destination. It didn't have to be good lift – just enough to hold me up long enough for the wind to blow me there. I saw an airport in the sunlight and decided to go into the light. There were a lot of wisps forming, but no well formed cumulous clouds. I found weak lift and was able to slowly climb up to 3,000 ft AGL.

As I drifted downwind in the weak lift my final glide computer started to give me indications that I might actually make it. First it said I would arrive at the Chicago Glider Club 500 feet below the airport. Ten minutes later it said I would just make it there. Fifteen minutes later it said I would arrive with 1,500 ft to spare! I couldn't see the airport as I was still 20 miles away, but I decided to start my final glide. As I got within 10 miles I still couldn't see the airport and I started to worry about whether I was on a final glide to nowhere. I finally saw the glider trailers at the airport when I was about 2 miles out! I was so excited! I had made it! I arrived at 2,000 ft and landed after getting a good look at the airport from the air. When the glider rolled to a stop I opened the canopy and yelled out a big "Yahoooo!". I couldn't believe that I had actually made it to the gliderport I had declared!

I flew 320 miles (515 km) in 6 hours – in a motorless aircraft! The flight should get me the distance legs of my Gold and Diamond Badges. (Gold distance is 300 km and Diamond distance is 500 km.) I was treated to a warm welcome by some familiar faces including Neal Ridenour and Duane Eisenbeiss. Everyone was very friendly, helpful and interested in the flight. They were glad that I had decided to land at their gliderport. I was glad that their gliderport was where they said it was!

Steve arrived with my trailer at about 9:00 p.m. and we were on our way home by about 10:00. I was at home and in bed by 8:30 a.m. Sunday morning.

That flight was a dream come true for me! The weather was perfect for the majority of the flight. It was also fun flying along with Don. Even though I never saw him, I still shared a great flight with him.

I owe my crew a big thank you for all the driving he did. Thanks a lot Steve! Without you I would not have gone on this great adventure.